

Young Voters, Group Identification and Brexit

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The Brexit referendum divided the UK in a number of interesting ways. A number of studies have identified the differences in voting behaviour between London and the rest of England, as well as illuminating differences in ethnicities, social class and educational attainments, however, there exists an area of social-psychological research which adds an extra layer of confusion to understanding attitudes and perceptions toward Brexit. This is the dual phenomena of in-group favouritism and out-group derogation.

Group identification occurs when an individual begins to experience a 'sense of belonging to a social, cultural or sub-cultural group' (Chandler and Munday 2016). Research by Iacoviello et al (2017) and Vanhoomissen and Van Overwalle (2010), among many others, show that, when given the appropriate circumstances, people will favour the members of the groups with which they most readily identify. This is why the 2016 EU referendum, in the context of two elections which preceded and succeeded it, respectively, creates a layer of confusion.

If young voters, aged 18 to 30, constitute an observable group, this group voted strongly in favour of the UK remaining a member state of the European Union. However, in the UK, this group also strongly supported Jeremy Corbyn in both the 2015 Labour Party Leadership election, and the 2017 General Election. At face value, these outcomes seem perfectly logical. Jeremy Corbyn represents a youth-friendly brand of national politics that advocates unilateral nuclear disarmament, pro-environmentalism and large investment in public services for the poorest in society. Furthermore, young voters were always likely to favour "Remain" in opposition to the largely far-right-supported Leave campaign.

Young voters whom identify as both "Corbyn Supporters" and "Remainers" creates an intriguing paradox because of the differing political positions which should underpin membership of each respective group. Membership of the Corbyn Supporters group should require an opposition to neoliberal free-trade and austerity, a

preference for direct democracy and a distrust of political elites. These tenets of the group membership would put young voters in direct opposition to the Remainers group. Remainer group members favour both an immigration policy which restricts freedom of movement for some of the poorest people in the Africa, Asia and Latin America, and a system of capitalism which is based on competition rather than socialist solidarity and cooperation.

For many young voters, simultaneous membership of both groups is as inevitable as it is contradictory. An exasperation with Blairite Labour, tarnished Liberal Democrat and Conservative Party politics leaves Corbyn Supporter group membership as the most salient option. Similarly, the desire to reject overt racism, rising fascism and generalised-xenophobia precludes most young voters from seeking membership among Leavers or “Hard Brexiteers”. While the group membership model makes the relationship between the two voting patterns clear, it does not resolve the conflicting between the two competing visions for the UK and Europe as a whole.

We are conducting research which explores voters’ changing attitudes and perceptions toward Brexit in this most crucial year of Brexit. Have your say in the debate by taking our short survey here: www.bit.do/cbsbrexitsurvey

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